

# Altered States: LGBTQ-R

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Dr Daniel Baker is an artist, curator, and researcher. A Romani Gypsy, born in the UK, he holds a PhD on the subject of Gypsy aesthetics from the Royal College of Art, London. Baker curated FUTUROMA at the 58th International Art Exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 2019. Publications include *WE ROMA: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, *Ex Libris*, and *FUTUROMA*. He lives and works in London.



During the completion of my MA dissertation ‘The Queer Gypsy’ in 2001, which examined the experience of Gay Romanians in the United Kingdom, I had in my imagination an image which represented the aim of my research – the examination and reconciliation of the two experiential phenomena which underpinned my life to date – the gay experience and the Gypsy experience. The picture in my head resituated the red wheel from the Romani flag to the multicoloured rainbow flag, to produce a hybrid image symbolising the unification of two seemingly disparate identity positions. In bringing together Gay, Romany, and Traveller (GRT) and queer subjectivities for debate, my research process felt like a healing, if traumatic, journey. Making sense of my own experience, in relation to that of gay GRT community members who I interviewed, proved both daunting yet cathartic.

Having trained as a visual artist from an early age, my default mode of enquiry is to approach things from a visual perspective. It is no surprise then that I seek to produce a visual embodiment of the intersectionality uncovered by my research to symbolise the forging of a queer GRT subjectivity. The aim was a unifying image that, in an instant, could convey the many complex ideas within my research and represent two important aspects of my own life. But, even with the best of intentions, the pressure to complete my final paper by the deadline, and the technical skill required to produce a convincing image seamlessly embodying my intentions, meant that I was unable to realise this hybrid flag in a satisfactory manner before submission. Even as the final spell check and bibliographical reference were signed off, the image of a queer GRT flag was clear in my mind – another idea for a new artwork to be filed away for future development. Creating the hybrid flag I had in mind did not happen until some years later.

The existing flag designs that I intended to use had both been developed in the 1970s. The Romani flag in 1971, at the first World Romani Congress, held in Orpington (where I was born ten years before) and the rainbow flag in 1978, by the artist Gilbert Baker for the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade. The Romani flag consists of a blue background representing the sky, and a green one, representing the earth. It has a 16-spoke red chakra, or cartwheel, at its centre. The latter stands for the itinerant tradition of the Romani people and acts as an homage to the flag of India, where our diaspora is said to have set out from. The rainbow flag, as used as a symbol of LGBTQ+ pride, has undergone several revisions since its original eight-colour design, with many variations intending to denote wider affiliations and inclusions. The traditional, and still most common variant, consists of six stripes: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet with the red stripe on top, as in a natural rainbow. It is this version that I used in my design.

It was not until 2014, when I was invited by the Director of the Romani Cultural and Arts Company, Isaac Blake, to produce an exhibition of new works, as part of their Arts Council of Wales funded Gypsy Maker programme, that seeds began to flower from the idea sown during my MA. As part of an exhibition entitled ‘MakeShifting: Structures of Mobility’,<sup>[1]</sup> I produced a series of hybrid flags entitled ‘Altered States’. The series comprised a number of new flag designs which combined the red wheel of the Romani flag with the existing flags of Wales, the United Kingdom, and the European Union. These new flags acted simultaneously as icons of integration and symbols of resistance. The harmonious design expressed an

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1 See online: <http://www.romaniarts.co.uk/daniel-bakers-makeshifting-structures-of-mobility>.

optimistic scenario of coexistence but, at the same time, denoted that Romani communities have existed within these nations and territories for hundreds of years.

The MakeShifting exhibition project was concerned with themes of physical, social, economic, and aesthetic mobility and the structures that enhance and/or inhibit these freedoms. Objects such as ladders, wheels, ropes, and flags were employed as signifiers of both mobility and fixity. The resulting artworks exemplified contradictory qualities, such as attraction and diversion, display, and concealment, functionality, and obsolescence. The hybrid flags that formed the Altered States series looked at the possibilities of adaptability and inclusion within more abstract structures of nationhood. The show aimed to rethink identities, with particular emphasis on relationships between the marginal and the mainstream in society.

In 2016 I was invited to exhibit at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Glasgow as part of the GLITCH<sup>2</sup> Queer People of Colour Film Festival in 2017. Digital Desperadoes, the organisers of the festival, had decided to include an art exhibition as part of the film programme and thought my work would sit well within the context of the event. Along with the many existing works I had in mind for the show I realised that now was the time to make real the flag that had first developed over fifteen years earlier. And so 'Altered States: LGBTQ-R' finally materialised as a large-scale flag for exhibition and parading, as well as small-scale postcards for wider distribution and to draw attention to Queer Romani issues.

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<sup>2</sup> See online: <http://www.romaniarts.co.uk/daniel-bakers-makeshifting-structures-of-mobility>.